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SUBJECT: AFTER THE DUMA ELECTIONS

REF: A. MOSCOW 5153

[1](#)B. MOSCOW 4422

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With the messy Duma elections fast fading from memory here (although the final results will not be certified until at least December 10), attention has shifted to the March 2 presidential elections. The four parties in the new Duma have scheduled their congresses for mid-December, at which they are each expected to nominate a presidential candidate, and a number of independent candidates have indicated their intention to gather the two million signatures necessary to run. Although the Duma election results were arguably not as overwhelming as Putin wanted, pro-Kremlin spinmeisters have attempted to improve the President's hand by arguing that Just Russia's 7.74 percent should be added to United Russia's 64 percent in calculating the strength of Putin's mandate. The key question remains: what will Putin do with that mandate in stage-managing the succession? Many scenarios that would have Putin retain influence remain in play; as Duma Chairman, United Russia leader, President again after a pause, and perhaps national leader. We believe it likely that Putin has not settled on a scenario, and driving his decision will be personalities, clan politics, and calculations about his own future. It seems highly unlikely that the Constitution will be amended to allow him to serve a third consecutive term. End summary.

A Weak Mandate

[1](#)2. (SBU) The December 2 Duma elections have been construed by Kremlin-friendly spinmeisters to have given Putin the popular mandate he sought in agreeing to head United Russia's party list. Although nothing during the course of the campaign was said about adding Just Russia's 7.74 percent to United Russia's 64 percent in calibrating the strength of Putin's mandate, United Russia's failure to win 70 percent of the vote forced the Kremlin to hijack Just Russia's votes in order to be able to argue that Putin's gamble had succeeded. There were multiple signs that Putin in the immediate aftermath of the election was unhappy with United Russia's performance: he failed as promised to appear at the party's headquarters on election eve, he distanced himself from United Russia in comments offered the day after the elections, and heads have rolled at some of United Russia's regional headquarters. Putin reportedly was embarrassed as well by the low turnout --57 percent-- in his native St. Petersburg, and the poor performance there of United Russia, which managed only 51 percent. Others have pointed out that United Russia with Putin won a smaller percentage of votes that Putin did in the 2004 presidential election. At a roundtable on December 3, Kremlin-cozy commentators Gleb Pavlovskiy, Valeriy Fadeev, and Sergey Markov (who is on

United Russia's list) criticized the party for its lack of transparency and poor election performance.

Party Conventions

13. (SBU) The presidential campaign is already underway (ref b). The four parliamentary parties have tentatively scheduled their congresses, at which they will nominate their candidates. The Communists will hold their convention on December 15, where they are expected to nominate Chairman Gennadiy Zyuganov. LDPR will convene December 13 and Chairman Vladimir Zhirinovskiy has already declared that he will be his party's candidate. The Kremlin-supported Just Russia and United Russia will most likely hold their nominating conventions on December 18 and 19 respectively, and it is around them that much of the speculation swirls. Immediately after the Duma election, United Russia Chairman Gryzlov staked first claim in the succession sweepstakes, when he told the press that his party's mandate meant that its candidate would be the odds-on favorite to succeed Putin. Gryzlov also told the press that he expected to remain Chairman of the new Duma, and party head. It is expected, but not certain that Just Russia will nominate a candidate. Chairman Sergey Mironov has said that his party could nominate its own candidate, abstain, or support the nominee of another party.

14. (SBU) There is intense speculation about the identity of United Russia's candidate. The party is scheduled to hold a joint session of its Presidium and General Council on December 7, where the date of the convention will be decided and the names of potential candidates formally considered. Some commentators suggest that the date chosen for the convention, which could be held as late as December 23, will signal whether the real successor will come from United Russia or from the "For Putin" movement. Since the "For Putin" movement does not have the status of a political party, it must nominate its candidate, if it plans to do so, by December 18. Observers suggest that if United Russia schedules its convention later than December 18, then it will be the organization that will nominate Putin's almost certain successor, or it may simply add its weight to the candidate nominated at an earlier convention by the "For Putin" meeting.

Non-Duma Party Candidates

15. (SBU) Central Election Commission (CEC) Secretary Nikolay Konkin told the media December 5 that the CEC had received official notification of intent to run from four potential candidates, among them ex-Prime Minister Kasyanov. On the same day, CEC Chairman Churov told reporters he had information that about ten independent candidates had signaled their intention to run, and the media have speculated that among them will be Yabloko Chairman Yavlinskiy, ex-dissident Vladimir Bukovskiy, ex-Central Bank Chairman Gerashchenko, former Duma Deputy Nikolay Kuryanovich, Garry Kasparov, SPS member Nemtsov, and indicted Arkhangelsk Mayor Aleksandr Donskoy. In order to be nominated, non-parliamentary party candidates must:

- convene a meeting of a nominating group of no less than 500 supporter by December 18;
- register the 500 official supporters with the CEC;
- collect two million signatures and submit them to the CEC by January 16;
- have the CEC certify that no more than five percent of the collected signatures are invalid.

Multiple Candidates

16. (SBU) Many suspect that United Russia will have the honor of nominating Putin's "real" successor, but other point to Putin's expressed dissatisfaction with the party (he criticized it in campaign appearances in Krasnoyarsk and

Luzhniki, as well as after the elections) in suggesting that United Russia might not be the preferred platform, and other scenarios are possible.

¶17. (C) Just Russia with, many suspect, some help from the Kremlin, inched over the seven-percent threshold and into the Duma, where it could serve as a launchpad for another Kremlin-friendly candidate. If the "For Putin" movement were to nominate a candidate as well, there could be as many as three Kremlin proteges, which would allow Putin to mask his true intentions until the March 2 elections. Other commentators suggest that three, or even two, serious Kremlin contenders could cause increased tension among the Kremlin clans. The possible destabilizing effect of serious competition means that only one serious candidate is the more likely option. Yet other speculation has it that two serious contenders would produce a more malleable President with a weaker electoral mandate than Putin.

New President Abdicates

¶18. (SBU) If there is one serious candidate, his identity may indicate if he will serve a full term or be a place holder for Putin. In that exercise, potential successors have been divided into "strong" and "weak" categories, with the likes of First Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov, Russian Railroads Chairman Yakunin, Rosoboroneksport's Chemezov, and others considered likely, if appointed to serve as full-fledged presidents, and a Viktor Zubkov step aside at some point in order to allow Putin, without violating the constitutional prohibition against three consecutive terms, to be re-elected President. Against the background of such a nomination, commentators thought it significant that Putin, in remarks immediately after the elections, called on the new Duma to go into session as quickly as possible and suggested that one item of business might be the separation of the Duma and presidential elections, accompanied by a constitutional amendment to lengthen the time in office. Amendment of the constitution would be followed by new elections, the argument goes, in which Putin could participate.

Putin Stays Under Amended Constitution

¶19. (C) Although Putin has repeatedly excluded this option, and we believe it is very unlikely, the increasingly remote possibility that the Constitution could be amended to allow a third consecutive term continues to be discussed. Arguing against it is the fact that the process must be completed before the deadline for nominating candidates -- unless that provision of the law were amended as well. In other words, the new Duma must convene and adopt the proposed amendment, which must then be ratified by two-thirds of the country's 86 regions. Then the Federation Council, must vote, and the President sign the amendment; all before December 23, the deadline for nomination of presidential candidates. With the CEC not scheduled to certify the election results as final before December 10, and the Duma not allowed to go into session until certification; that would allow only 13 days for that cumbersome procedure to be completed.

Putin Becomes Duma Chairman

¶10. (SBU) Putin ran as numbers one, two, and three on United Russia's federal list, and is entitled to join the Duma as a deputy, if he resigns the presidency. In addition, a law passed in spring 2007 allows any Duma deputy to decline his seat immediately after the elections, then take up his seat at any time during the year following the elections. United Russia's constitutional majority and the national authority that Putin enjoys would entitle him to wield considerable power. He could paralyze the legislative process if he chose, pass laws that might allow the legislature to exert greater control over the workings of the executive branch, and/or use United Russia's constitutional majority to

re-adjust the balance of power among the branches of government.

¶11. (SBU) The Constitution gives the Federation Council, not the Duma, the power to impeach the President, but the Duma has the authority to begin the impeachment process, which could be used as a means of control on the independence of any President. On December 5, the LDPR's Zhirinovskiy, who sometimes is used to float ideas for the Kremlin, suggested that the Federation Council be abolished and its powers consolidated in a more powerful Duma.

Putin as National Leader

¶12. (SBU) "Spontaneous" demonstrations around the country during the Duma election campaign culminated with the formal creation of a "For Putin" popular movement on November 18 in Tver. The movement has lobbied for Putin to become Russia's "national leader," a so far ill-defined post that some suggest could take the form of the practice of outgoing Chinese premiers, who retain authority over the country's political course via a higher military council. Others note that the presidential nature of Russia's government would limit the ability of a national leader to influence events, barring creation of a powerful new post via amendment of the constitution.

Putin as Party Leader

¶13. (SBU) Putin's barely disguised contempt for the United Russia party during the course of the campaign has led to two schools of thought, with some suggesting that there will be a purge of the leadership to create a much more effective party.

Comment

¶14. (C) We believe it likely that Putin has not yet settled on a scenario, and driving his decision will be personalities, the relative strength of Kremlin clans, and calculations about his own future not discussed here. It seems highly unlikely that Putin would violate the Constitution in resolving his succession dilemma, although he no doubt is under pressure to do so by some in his inner circle.
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